

King hearings

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House ends marathon inquiry, fails to prove clear conspiracy

WASHINGTON

The House assassinations committee completed its public inquiry into the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Friday without exposing a clear conspiracy in the assassination of the civil rights leader.

"The evidence tends to paint the outlines of a conspiracy," Rep. Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, the committee's chairman, said at the end of the final public hearing. But he added in an interview: "I'm not sure, given the passage of time, that we proved conclusively that there was a conspiracy."

King was killed in Memphis on April 4, 1968. James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the assassination a year later, but later recanted his confession and said he was framed.

While not reaching any final conclusions about its two-year inquiry, the committee has said the evidence points to some involvement by Ray's brothers, Jerry and John.

Investigators also explored the existence of an alleged \$50,000 offer by two St. Louis businessmen for King's death in 1968.

Investigators found a half dozen persons with direct links to the Ray brothers also had direct or indirect contacts with the two St. Louis men, who were, like the Ray brothers, active in the 1968 presidential campaign of George Wallace.

Committee counsel G. Robert Blakey has said because a congressional committee cannot use grand jury investigative techniques or obtain authority to use wiretaps, and because 10 years have passed, there were inherent

limitations on how far the investigation could go. As a result, he said, "The realistic expectations of a major breakthrough ... are small."

The committee will stay in business until the end of the year when a final report will be issued on the King killing and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Two days of hearings on methods of preventing further political assassinations will be held in mid-December. But the committee's major work is done.

One of the committee's final witnesses was John Ray, who denied playing any role in a bank robbery that the committee believes financed the flight of James Earl Ray after the assassination.

Both John and his brother Jerry, who testified Thursday, denied any role in the assassination.

Both men testified after committee counsel G. Robert Blakey said the King assassination may have been planned within the Ray family.

The committee has said it believes all three Ray brothers probably robbed a bank in Alton, Ill., of \$27,000 on July 13, 1967.

Committee investigators believe James Earl Ray's travels after the assassination — to Los Angeles, New Orleans, Atlanta, Montreal, Mexico, Birmingham and Memphis, England and Portugal — were financed with his share of the proceeds.

However, John Ray denied taking part in five separate bank robberies in the St. Louis area. He explained his conviction for a sixth bank holdup as a frameup.

A balding, paunchy man who was arrested in St. Louis earlier this week and

charged with trespass and assault in what police called an apparent burglary attempt, John Ray described himself to the committee as "a moderate segregationist."

He was asked about an FBI report in which he was reported to have said about the King assassination in 1968:

"What's all the excitement about? He (James Earl) only killed a nigger. If he had killed a white man you (the FBI agent) wouldn't be here. King should have been killed 10 years ago."

John Ray said he couldn't recall making the statement.

The investigators also showed John Ray copies of records from the Missouri State Prison showing he visited James Earl on April 22, 1967, the day before James escaped.

John Ray said he could not recall being at the prison on that date and denied assisting his brother to flee the prison.

The committee has testimony from other persons who quote John as claiming that he met James Earl in a car near the prison in Jefferson City, Mo.

Much of Friday's hearing was spent in bitter sparring between the committee's chairman, Rep. Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, and John Ray's lawyer, James H. Lesar.

Threatening Lesar with a congressional contempt citation or removal from the hearing room, Stokes told the lawyer at one point, "You are a disgrace."

Lesar shot back, "I will ask you to recess and step outside and make that statement where you do not enjoy congressional immunity."

—Associated Press